



## Literacy

*"A third of the nation cannot read these words."* So wrote Jonathan Kozel in his masterpiece *Illiterate America*.

If you are reading this issue of *Report*, you are one of the fortunate two-thirds in our country who can read, while the other third tries in every conceivable way to cover up the fact that they cannot. The next time someone in the supermarket says to you, "Dearie, can you read this for me...I left my glasses at home," just remember that person probably cannot read.

What does it mean to be illiterate? It does **not** mean ignorance. The **raw illiterate** has no knowledge of the ABCs. The **functionally illiterate** has some basic reading skills but not enough to use written information to function in society or achieve one's goals or potential. Many school leavers are in this category. The **culturally illiterate** does not have sufficient information needed to thrive within a given society. I believe to be completely literate is a lifetime pursuit.

Not surprisingly, most of the world's two billion illiterate people live in the Third World. Gospel Recordings reports that school has not been taught in Benin for two years and a fifth of the teachers in Zaire have been fired in the last ten years. The United Nations claims that the world's 37 poorest nations have cut their educational budgets by 25 percent during the 1980s. It is no wonder that illiteracy is expected to increase in the next decade.

But more surprising to me are findings within North America. Samuel Blumenfield states that in the United States one in five young adults ages 21-25 are functionally illiterate; 27 percent of high school students drop out; SAT verbal scores are the lowest ever. In a GATEWAY Adult Learning seminar in Philadelphia we were told that half of those tutored in the program have high school diplomas. With such shocking statistics at hand, it is amazing that the Christian church has done so little to address this issue.

Believing that God desires whole people, the writers in this issue of *Report* share from different perspectives their Christian responses to those who are illiterate. Melanie Zuercher takes us to southeastern Kentucky where the use of local people's stories has been effective in advancing literacy and working for social change. The story of Melita, a Zambian widow, shows how literacy can be a path to fuller personhood. Esther Spurrier allows us to "putt" along with her on the Honda to a rural tutor-training session in Zambia where we can feel the struggle and satisfaction of the educative process. Donna Pisatelli tells of her experience of literacy work through prison ministry and elsewhere, showing how literacy can be a tool of evangelism.

Somewhat akin to illiteracy, yet different, is the realm of ESL (English as a Second Language), which seeks to meet the language needs of the tide of international students flooding our centers of learning. Lori Weiler and Becky Eckert give us a glimpse into the waiting room of the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers in Edmonton, Alta., where new Canadians find love and caring. Taemi Ojima candidly speaks as a foreigner in America, describing her impetus for teaching English to international wives.

As we wrestle with the illiteracy issue--what it is, its causes, its symptoms and results--hopefully some possible solutions will flash into the minds of readers. Each of us can help. Mutuality of learning says: "Those who know, teach. Those who don't, learn."

To aid those wanting to investigate the literacy needs of their community, a list of resources is included to help you get started.

**Miriam Stern, compiler, and her husband Pete served 34 years with Brethren in Christ Missions in Zambia and Zimbabwe. They presently live in west Philadelphia helping the international student community with English, Bible studies and other needs.**

Open my eyes that I may see  
wonderful things in your law.  
--Psa. 119:18

by Melanie Zuercher

## Sharing Stories and Educating for Social Change

In the fall of 1979, two years after severe flash floods had ravaged much of eastern Kentucky and southern West Virginia, the residents of the small town of Beauty in Martin County, Ky., got some disturbing news. Apparently, local government officials were planning to move their entire town. The agency in charge of public housing had applied for a federal grant, called a Community Development Block Grant, to "relocate Beauty out of the flood plain."

Beauty's citizens were upset because no one had *asked* them if they wanted their town moved! One of the requirements for the Block Grant application process is that it involve those living in the affected area. Martin County officials had ignored the requirement. Beauty decided to fight back.

Some of the town's residents formed a group called the Concerned Citizens of Martin County (CCMC). Over the course of the next nine or ten months, they wrote letters to government officials on all levels. They published their own newsletter. They had numerous letters and articles in the county newspaper. They met with officials to present their position. They educated an entire town about Block Grants and citizens' rights. In the end, they saved Beauty: the federal government returned the Block Grant application because of "lack of citizen participation."

One of the problems CCMC members encountered in their efforts to organize a whole town over the "citizen participation" issue was the fact that a high percentage of Beauty residents could not read or could not read well. CCMC members countered this by going door-to-door with copies of the 52-page Block Grant application and reading it to anyone who requested it.

About a year after Beauty was reprieved, members of CCMC joined with other eastern Kentuckians to form a broader-based citizens' group called the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition (KFTC). KFTC was founded to address the fact that unmined coal in Kentucky was taxed at such a low rate that it was practically exempted. This meant that some of the richest companies and individuals in the state paid very

little in taxes because so much of their wealth consisted of unmined coal property. Eastern Kentucky, with the bulk of Kentucky's marketable coal, clearly showed the effects of this weak tax base. Schools, health care facilities and community services, like sewer systems and garbage pickup-things that depend on taxes--were of generally poor quality or even nonexistent.



Although KFTC's primary focus was fair taxation, thanks to the experience of CCMC the organization also had a concern for adult education, particularly literacy. It was obvious that the literacy profile of KFTC's "target constituency" in eastern Kentucky was similar to that of Beauty. By some estimates, one-third to one-half of adults in eastern Kentucky cannot read or read at very low levels.

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It isn't right that nearly 28 million North Americans cannot read well enough to write a letter to a loved one.  
--Martha A. Lane in *Churches and Literacy*

...proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.  
--Lev. 25:10

However, KFTC did not do anything concrete about addressing illiteracy until about 1986. In that year, one of the members of KFTC's Steering Committee was Willa Hood, librarian at Leslie County Public Library and director of Leslie County's literacy program. Willa's dream was that KFTC could somehow produce literacy material on a reading level that would be usable for many of the students in literacy programs in Leslie and other eastern Kentucky counties.

So in 1986, KFTC began looking for a person to staff a new "literacy project." Renton Amell, then coordinator for Mennonite Central Committee's (MCC's) Appalachia program, was a KFTC member. Through him, KFTC applied to MCC for a volunteer. I came to Harlan County, Ky., in December 1986 and spent the next three and a half years working on the KFTC literacy project as an MCC volunteer.

I had majored in English and writing at Goshen (Ind.) College and had minimal experience in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). But I really knew nothing about adult literacy. So I started my MCC assignment by volunteering as a tutor with the Harlan County literacy program. I had three students. An older woman, Lora, gave me my most rewarding literacy teaching experience because she wanted so much to learn and tried so hard.

Despite the pleasure I got from working with Lora, it quickly became obvious to me that literacy tutoring was not something I really enjoyed or was good at. However, I did learn a lot about what adult literacy materials existed and how little of these were geared, as far as subject matter, to Appalachian readers.

Early on I talked to Willa Hood and other folks connected to KFTC who also worked with adult literacy. Willa identified two reasons KFTC should work on adult literacy materials. One was the long-standing problem of KFTC depending heavily on the written word, yet knowing many of the people it wanted to reach couldn't read its material. Another was simply that there were not many materials available that were interesting and relevant to reading students in Appalachia. There needed to be supplementary reading material that was not "See Spot run in New York City," but dealt with topics that meant something to people who lived in small towns or up in the hollows of the hills, who raised big gardens and often their own meat, who knew nothing about public transportation because no such thing existed in the region, whose recreation was hunting and fishing and looking for wild flowers and edible plants in the mountains, and to whom family and church were of utmost importance.

Most of the reading specialists, reading tutors and directors of literacy programs I talked to over the course of my first year agreed with Willa's second point. But KFTC developed a still more radical idea. They thought that Appalachian people ought also to be able to read about things like strip mining, who had the power in their communities and why, the reasons for a weak tax base, and how citizens could really make democracy work.

Once committed to the idea, creating relevant materials took time. The first piece of literacy material I produced for KFTC was a slender paperback--in fact, it was done on a word processor, photocopied on ordinary office paper and stapled together--called *The Blind Mule and Other Stories*. It was a collection of four reminiscences by Bill Shouse of Breathill County, Ky. At age 98, Bill was learning to read for the first time (meanwhile, his wife Lucille, about a dozen years younger, was getting her GED, the high school equivalency diploma, and talking about going to college!). Bill's tutor, Lois Gross, had collected the stories from Bill and when Lois and I happened to meet at a consultation about "relevant, student-generated literacy material," one thing led to another. *The Blind Mule* became KFTC's pilot project. It certainly was not going to bring about any upheaval in the social order. But it made Bill proud and happy, and almost without exception the tutors and students to whom I sent sample copies loved it and asked for more.

The next piece of material more closely matched KFTC's goals. It was a coloring book called *Save the Homeplace*. It explained strip mining and broad form deeds in very simple terms. *Save the Homeplace* came out in conjunction with KFTC's 1988 campaign to pass an amendment to the Kentucky constitution that would do away with abuse of broad form deeds. These were deeds that were signed mostly between about 1880 and 1920 in the eastern U.S. coalfields. Broad form deeds separated minerals, like coal, oil and gas, from the surface land and gave the mineral owner access to the minerals. The problem began occurring with the advent of strip mining in the 1950s, when mineral owners began to use broad form deeds to tear up the surface land to get the coal.

KFTC's campaign to pass the broad form deed succeeded overwhelmingly. I have no documentation of how much *Save the Homeplace* contributed! It did provide an example, however, of how "politics" and "education" can become entangled. A coal company lawyer in Floyd County, Ky., happened upon a copy of *Save the Homeplace* in the basement of a Presbyterian church which housed a literacy program. He raised quite a fuss over it. The Presbyterian Church gives money to KFTC's non-political arm, Kentucky Coalition, and the lawyer thought Presbyterian money (he is

Seventy percent of the world's illiterates are women and most literacy work is being done by women.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has workers involved in literacy and language education in North America, Central and South America, Africa, Middle East, Europe and Asia. Programs vary from place to place. For example, in El Salvador an MCCer is part of a parish team that trains local literacy promoters. In Bolivia MCC supports a radio literacy program. In

Kentucky 6 MCCers work in adult education. A worker in Zambia teaches English literacy to members of the Kimbanguist church.

a Presbyterian) had helped pay for *Save the Homeplace*. In fact, funding had come from the political arm, not Kentucky Coalition. KFTC weathered that minor storm, but it taught me the truth of the saying that "a little education can be a dangerous thing." The coal company lawyer and his employer knew it.



As of this writing, the KFTC literacy project no longer exists as such. However, there are two KFTC members and full-time literacy workers (through VISTA, Volunteers In Service To America) who are working on producing material in the form of flyers that have to do with problems related to strip mining and what people can do about them. And it seems that since I first came in 1986, all over the central Appalachia region people are working on producing literacy materials that are relevant to central Appalachian readers.

I don't know if the "literacy level" in Beauty has improved since 1979 or even since 1986. But I do know that KFTC as an organization is now more aware of its lower-level readers and committed to doing what it can to further the cause of educating citizens for social change. I believe that thanks to KFTC's literacy project more people know that "producing literacy material" does not have to be difficult or complicated. Everyone has stories to tell, from Bill Shouse to the broad form deed victims to the people next door. Those stories can be "teaching aids." Those stories can teach us, the "literate," the most.

Melanie Zuercher lives in Whitesburg, Ky. She just finished compiling the 10-year history of KFTC, now called Kentuckians For The Commonwealth. She works for KFTC on a new project producing leadership skills training material in audio and video form to help make it more accessible to lower-level readers.

In my time working for KFTC, I only produced one more piece of material. Three pieces in three and a half years is not much, I know. The process turned out to be lengthy, though not difficult, and along the way I got involved in a lot of other things, like the broad form deed amendment campaign. The third piece of material was by far the largest and most ambitious. It consisted of two books. One had first-person stories by two men and two women from eastern Kentucky who had suffered the effects of broad form deeds on their land and told how they organized people through KFTC to eventually win a solution to their problem, the broad form deed amendment. The other book contained grammar, spelling and writing exercises to go with each story. (I also collected first-person stories from several women and still hope to make those into a reader, without the exercises.)

...he has sent me to bind up  
the brokenhearted, to proclaim  
freedom for the captives, and  
release from darkness for the  
prisoners.  
--Isa. 61:1

To bestow on them a crown of  
beauty instead of ashes, the  
oil of gladness instead of  
mourning, and a garment of  
praise instead of a spirit of  
despair.  
--Isa. 61:3

by Miriam Stern

## Melita

The news was numbing. Big strong Muleya, still in his prime, was dead. Where would we find a church treasurer to hold the church money as carefully as he?

Thoughts raced madly through my mind. Eight children still needing a father. Melita, a new widow and no marketable skill. Perhaps her worst fate was that she could not read or write.

Funeral arrangements followed the typical Tonga form, with people streaming to the home to weep and wail their sympathy. Being uneducated, Melita was expected to act in traditional ways.

The burial was in the countryside four hours from the capital city. The real measure of the value placed on a widow became evident when Melita returned to the city following the week of posthumous ceremonies in the home village. It was expected that she would be handed over to a brother of the deceased as a second or third wife in keeping with the Old Testament levirate law that insured security for a widow.

As a Christian, Melita refused the arrangement. She, a widow with eight children (seven still needing support), watched as relatives of the late Muleya emptied her house of pots, dishes, beds, etc., until she was destitute. Some things are more cruel than death itself.

The Christian community rallied around Melita with contributions and moral support. Coming to know her better, we were surprised to learn that her late husband had denied her permission to attend adult education night classes years ago when it was the "in" thing, contending that she was too old.

A faithful member of the weekly women's meeting, Melita was always ready when I stopped by her house to pick her up. As most women usually arrived late, why not use this time to check out the possibility of Melita learning to read and write, I thought. This woman had won a special place in my heart and the challenge excited me, but how do you begin? This was before the development of the current Tonga Literacy program. I began with what was at hand.

Armed with a child's first grade primer, I set out one day to find Melita, and we began. Turning to page one, we looked at the picture. It was a mother. Then we looked at the word *maama* which is mother in the Tonga language. The plural is *baama*. Melita had pronounced these words all her life and now she knew what they looked like in print. She giggled with delight. We were both thrilled. Melita was not too old nor was she a slow learner. Every week a few new words were added and soon she was reading simple sentences and the shapes on paper were no longer a mystery to her.

Soon other women in the group caught the excitement of something new happening in their sister and encouraged her. Some saw the possibilities of them doing the same thing with their illiterate friends. Melita's children honored her by not laughing as their mother learned simple words with them, but supported her in every way possible. A new spark was in Melita's eyes...a new spring in her step.

She was soon in the second primer. She learned to find page numbers in books. Then we tried writing numbers. She labored over writing 1 to 100 in her notebook. Soon she was keeping track of weekly offerings (having learned about the decimal point) instead of keeping the record in her head.

Then we heard she was taking her Bible along to market and practicing reading while waiting for customers to buy her chickens. It was there she came to be known as "the lady with the Bible."

In our Lusaka church it was customary for a different family to do each of the four Advent lessons prior to Christmas. Often parents would ask their children to read the selected Scripture portions, but when it came to the Muleya family's turn, Melita stood up proudly in front of the big congregation and read it herself. One business man exclaimed that she read better than his wife who had been reading for years.

Japan is 99 percent literate while U.S.A. has the highest illiteracy rate of any industrialized country.

Literacy enables effective communication. Where communication fails, so do undertakings. Example: the Tower of Babel.  
--Miriam Stern

Today Melita is a respected member of her family, church and community. Her hands are busy making things to sell to help support the younger family members. She is delighted when she can serve guests her especially tasty "nsima and nkuku"--stiff corn meal mush and chicken. We often took visiting friends to her home for a taste of true Tonga hospitality. Melita could lift her head again.

We made our final departure from Zambia in August of 1986. We visited Melita one last time. As we drove away from her house that day, my eyes were swimming and my heart breaking to leave this little woman, once so helpless but now strong. She stood in the dirt road waving and waving until we were out of sight.

Melita can stand now. Literacy brought a new dimension and quality to her life. I was humbled that my simple methods could make such a difference.

I like the words of Job 31:17: "Never have I let widows live in despair...or eaten my morsel alone."



by Esther Spurrier

## Literacy in Rural Zambia... Struggle and Success

I recall rather incredulously my first literacy tutor-training seminar. An announcement in the Bishop's Newsletter of the Zambian Brethren in Christ Church had launched this new ministry of the church. The pastor of a church thirty kilometers to the west had contacted me about coming on a certain weekend to share this new thing with his people. So, with a bit of nervousness mixed with great anticipation, I prepared myself.

I rolled up my charts in a small grass mat, tied them along with my box of books, sleeping bag and personal items for overnight to the carrier of our Honda 185 trail bike with strips of inner tube, put two hard-boiled eggs and a handful of peanuts in my pocket, and I was off!

When I arrived at the church, a bit before the appointed time, I was greeted warmly by the pastor. He helped me unload my gear into the church building, visited with me a

Say to the captives, "Come out," and to those in darkness, "Be free."  
--Isa. 49:9

{Before literacy study} I didn't know one bit how to read and hadn't had even one day in school. Now I can help my kids with their studies. It has helped me in everything. God is very great. Thanks be to God.  
--Teodora Tito, Santa Rosa, Bolivia

bit, and told me his wife would be along soon. It is unusual in Zambian society to sit alone very long, so the wife appeared very soon with a cup of tea to ward off the chill of the building and the winter wind. She told me that the women were still doing their work, but they would come as soon as they could. Of course! I might have the luxury on that day of no fields to tend, no wood and water to carry, no food to prepare, but they did not.

When the women finally did begin to arrive and organize themselves, it soon became clear that their purpose was to worship God, fellowship together, study the Word, sing and pray. What I had to offer in the way of teaching them to teach others to read was purely secondary. This literacy meeting was an excuse to get together. I bravely plunged on with my program, but felt like I was swimming against the tide--squeezing literacy training sessions into a women's weekend program.

As I packed up my gear the following afternoon and said my thanks and farewells to the dear women, I vowed I would do a better job of communicating beforehand the nature of the church's literacy program with pastors who inquired. I also wondered if we had over-generalized the felt need of some that learning to read was important to people in this area.

In some ways, the literacy program was an outgrowth of the Christian education work: taking Christian education literature to outlying areas, training Sunday school teachers, teaching Theological Education by Extension. As more printed material became available in the Tonga language, many of the 50 percent (national average) who could not read began to feel that they were missing out on something. The oral/aural tradition had felt the impact of the written word.

In the early 80s, the Brethren in Christ found out about an organization called Literacy International, based on Tulsa, Okla. It advertised that it had "the best of Laubach, plus." Its director, Rev. Robert Rice, had been making trips around the world each year for many years to supervise the writing of literacy primers in many languages in many countries of the world.

A letter of inquiry brought the reply that Rev. Rice was coming to Zambia in early 1982 and would be glad to meet with a Brethren in Christ writing team to produce literacy primers for the Tonga language. But first some groundwork had to be laid. One volunteer was instructed to go through the first five chapters of the Gospel of John in the Tonga Bible and count all the phonemes; the frequency of the

letter-sounds would determine the order in which the sounds would be introduced in the primers. "A" topped the list, with 1625 appearances, closely followed by "i", "l", "m" and "y". So these sounds formed the basis for Book 1, Lesson 1. The team of two missionaries and two Zambian pastors plus Rev. Rice worked solidly, choosing words made up of the phonemes already learned plus new ones for each lesson, writing drills and sentences, and selecting a Bible passage to go along with the lesson. One of the major goals of the program is to introduce the learner to the good news of the gospel. The last nineteen lessons of the course are Bible stories, rewritten in simple form. A Brethren in Christ schoolboy in Lusaka drew the pictures to illustrate the key words introduced in each lesson.

The unveiling of the newly published Tonga Primers coincided with a two-day workshop in Lusaka to teach people how to use the primers to teach people to read--and how to train others to be tutors. Trainers emphasized the necessity of a strong Christian commitment on the part of the tutors to keep them at this difficult task, for which they would receive no remuneration.

The firstfruits of the literacy program came from among young people--those who had to leave school either because of needing to work to support a family or because they had failed the exam necessary to go on with school. Agrippa, a gardener for one of the missionary households, began learning to read as soon as those first tutors returned to the bush from Lusaka with the primers. Two months later he publicly acknowledged his desire to follow Jesus in a revival meeting. He was overjoyed to learn that his wife-to-be was also learning to read from one of her friends who had been trained as a tutor. I soon found Fannie, a young sickle-cell anemia victim who had to drop out of school because she was sick so much. She was delighted with this chance to catch up to her age-mates. She was an avid learner and a joy to teach.

Older people did not learn quite as quickly--nor were they as ready to try. I thanked God for tutors who were willing to invest time and patience in this important work and for students whose commitment to learning outweighed the difficulty and sometimes embarrassment of the learning process. Ali, the Dutch nursing supervisor at the Brethren in Christ hospital, started teaching one of her friends, the youngest of three wives in a village near the hospital. On Tuesdays the woman walked to the hospital to have a lesson while Ali was on her lunch break. On Saturdays Ali bicycled the three miles to the woman's village for a lesson. Learning was not easy for her, and her co-wives were not supportive of her efforts, but she persevered.



**The literate person may not be sure of a decent job, but the illiterate has no chance at all and with it is denied the voice with which to protest the unjust allocations of privileges.**  
**--Jonathan Kozel in *Prisoner of Silence***

**Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed.**  
**--Isa. 1:17**

One side effect of my travels with literacy work began to be an increase in the number of visitors to our house. If someone I learned to know came to the hospital (where we lived because of my husband's work) for treatment or to visit a sick friend or relative, they were certain to stop in to greet me. I was continually challenged that my hospitality should not be found wanting, that it should be "as unto the Lord." Whenever I visited a Tonga village I was impressed with the extent of the hospitality given. The visitor was always given something to eat or drink during the visit. Often something was also given for the visitor to take home ("for the children"). Thus I would go home laden with maize, squashes, vegetables, wild honey, milk, eggs, a chicken or pigeon. When I experienced how generously these people gave out of the little they had, I was challenged to become a more gracious giver out of my comparative abundance. Worry about tomorrow had long been one of my besetting sins, but I could see God begin to work a change in me through these contacts.

Not all my efforts to train literacy tutors were as frustrating as that first experience had been. Though I enjoyed teaching someone to read much more than I liked training and motivating others to do the teaching, I knew that was the more important, the more far-reaching work. And my expectations grew as I saw God answer many of my prayers.

I remember "putting" (when I rode the Honda, I "putted" rather than "roared") up to a village on a hot afternoon and being shown to a small room with a huge tub of hot water where I could freshen up before our first meeting that evening. How far my hostess had to go to get that water, I'll never know. I found out later that the men of the area were only taking their cattle for water every other day, because they had so far to go at this dry time of the year.

When we assembled in the church for the first session, the split-log benches were filled with adults, and the floor was covered with children! Oh no, here we go again, I thought to myself. I did my best to explain the kind of work, commitment and dedication being a literacy tutor required.

I didn't sleep much that night. First of all, the woman lying next to me coughed all night, and wondered if my next TB test would convert to positive. I also wondered how I could ever teach a group that size--or how I could weed out the ones who just came along for the ride. Dear God, I prayed, I'd really like seven people who are ready to work hard to learn. That many I think I could handle.



The next morning after breakfast, I went to the church to set up my charts and prepare for the day. Soon the people--about a dozen adults--were assembled, and we started the first session. Some lost interest and disappeared at break time. Others were called away to see to other responsibilities. When we came to the end of our two days of intensive training, there were just seven who took the exam and became certified as tutors.

How fruitful has the literacy ministry been? It's been gratifying for the tutors to see light shine on faces as students begin to comprehend the strange symbols on the pages. It's been rewarding to see scores of people take time and energy to learn to teach others. Having literacy materials that incorporate the good news of Jesus Christ in each lesson has been an added blessing. But, as with all aspects of ministry, we can only share the Word--and the tools for reading the Word. We continue to rely on the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of these men and women to bring them to God.

**Esther D. Spurrier with her doctor husband John and two children, Rebecca and Matthew, served with Brethren in Christ Missions 1975-1987 in Macha area of the southern province of Zambia. A teacher by profession, literacy work was just one facet of Esther's ministry. Currently living in Dillsburg, Pa. and involved with people concerns worldwide, Esther is a member of the Brethren in Christ Board for World Missions.**



Some things non-readers cannot do:

- Use the telephone directory
- Read menus in a restaurant
- Fill out questionnaires, health forms, etc.
- Read labels on packaged foods

- Help children with homework
- Read notes sent home from teachers
- Travel freely (cannot read traffic signs and street names)
- Buy generic foods (they depend on pictures and logos to identify items, so the poorest people are denied benefits of less costly foods).
- Vote and make choices dependent on reading options

by Taemi Ojima

## Identification Plus: An English Teacher Not Fluent in English

Although English had been my best subject all through my school years and I had worked in an English-speaking office in Tokyo for three years, living in the United States has not been as easy as I had thought. The language has always been the problem. Not being able to understand English is not only a matter of survival but also of pride. I have felt so many times these eleven months that I am worthless and not wanted in this country.

Therefore, when my friends Pete and Mim asked me to help them with their English classes as a teacher, the first thing that came to my mind was that I was not qualified. The reason I accepted the offer after hesitation was not because I concluded that my English was good enough to teach, but, as a non-native speaker living in the United States myself, I thought I could share my experience with other internationals and encourage them to speak English.

Fluency in English is by no means the measure of one's value. We who are not fluent in English need the same kind of respect ordinary American people receive. We are not fools nor small children, but often we are treated as such, or we feel we are treated as such. It can discourage us from using English and even learning it. I want to help my students gain confidence so they can develop their ability to be their best.

I believe it is God's grace that my disadvantage is being used as an advantage. I hope I can make good use of it and be of help to anyone who needs me.

**Taemi Ojima, from Japan, has lived in Philadelphia since 1990 with her husband, a Wharton student. She creatively reaches out to lonely international wives, sharing in Miriam and Pete Stern's literacy ministry.**

by Donna Pisatelli

## Literacy as a Way to Share Faith

Several years ago I wanted to use my teaching skills and contribute to society in a useful way. Through Literacy Volunteers of America I learned of an opportunity to take a 16-hour training course to teach someone to read.

After taking the course I was assigned to a young Iranian who ran a clothing business. He was very bright and although he spoke beautiful English he had no reading or writing skills. I soon knew in my spirit that this was something worthwhile. I thoroughly enjoyed our lessons together. Unfortunately, his business moved and I lost my student within six weeks.

Several months later I was assigned to Daniel, who was totally different. Being a bit slow, he was, as a foster child, incorrectly diagnosed and committed to a mental hospital during his formative years, ages 7 to 16. His formal education was minimal to say the least. We worked together for 16 months, week after week. Due to Daniel's limited learning capacity, progress was much slower than I had hoped. Although his reading skills improved he still was not job-ready. It's difficult to believe that his reading level was not much above second grade when we started. Had I only looked at Daniel's gaining reading ability in the competitive job market, I would have become discouraged. But this was not my focus. I saw Daniel's self-esteem improve. He began to take more interest in his appearance. He learned to use a dictionary. We even discussed reading food menus. Ordering hamburgers and cokes all your life because you can't read the menu can get very boring at best. Also, Daniel and I just enjoyed learning something new together.

After learning to read in prison:

"Many who hear me think I went to school far beyond the eighth grade. This is due to my prison studies...I could for the first time pick up a book and read and understand what the book was saying...months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life."

--*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

The non-reader's background, history, ability, motivation, etc. can determine how long the process may take and how many reading skills will be acquired. From a purely educational point of view, my encounter with Daniel might be viewed as a failure; but as a person ministering the love of God, I would say I was satisfied with the "results."

On a few occasions, especially when an elderly friend died, we discussed the Lord and life after death. I remember feeling frustrated that I did not feel free to discuss my beliefs at length, especially during times of stress. This caused me to think on a deeper level: reading is useful but more important is sharing hope in Christ. Consequently, I developed a strong yearning to blend teaching reading with making the Word of God an open book to illiterate people.

One of my first attempts was in response to a need I felt in my own county in New Jersey. I had an opportunity to go into the local county jail with a journalist friend to gain exposure to prison life as I was being considered for a prison ministry.

In a chance meeting with an inmate I mentioned my volunteer work several times a week with two non-readers. Later, this same inmate confided to my friend that his 21-year-old sister couldn't read and asked if I could help. At that point I was working full-time and two students were all I could manage, so I sought someone from the church who would be eager to teach someone to read. This turned out to be a double benefit. The literacy student was assigned to a young woman named Doris who had multiple sclerosis, had been out of the labor force for over a year and had become depressed. Now Doris had a feeling of usefulness. This "match" ministered to both women as each used her strength to help the other.

Being instrumental in finding three illiterate students I decided to approach my church with a proposal for a reading program. My reading-tutoring experience had made me acutely aware of the need to reach out to the illiterate.

I attended a workshop in Pittsburgh, Pa. with Dr. Bill Kofmehl, the writer of the "Christian Literacy Series." It was the reading program I was looking for. After the pre-primer section, lessons were divided into three parts. The first was an introduction to new sounds or word patterns. The second and third parts were simple stories which differed significantly; the first was a general one but the second, based on the Bible, relied heavily on the Gospels. I found it exciting to open the Word of God as I taught the

person to read. My church decided to institute a literacy program. A reading hot-line was installed and we discovered advertising spots on the radio could be done free of charge.

I became further involved by holding a training class for prospective tutors...not as difficult as it sounds. Since I had been through the workshop myself and had trained one student with this reading method, the most difficult task was arranging available times for individual class members.



Starting a reading program is a ministry your church might consider. One person interested in coordinating the program could take the training, work with an illiterate student for a short time, then expand the program by holding a class for potential tutors. Dr. Kofmehl is very helpful and interested in working with churches, either by a personal visit or through his VCR tape, a tutor-training tool made available through his ministry.

Who should teach?

Two groups who make effective tutors are students and retirees. Two-way tutoring is a promising approach utilizing high school students with modest reading and

writing skills. Gaining confidence as they share what they know, it is a more effective motivation than remedial programs. Retirees compose the largest number of volunteers. They have fewer home obligations, more time, and perspective and experience to share. Senior citizens are especially appreciated by international students who generally revere age.

--Miriam Stern

Most recently I taught a young man of 18 years who was doing "prison time" in Alabama. As a chaplain's assistant with the We Care Program, I worked with J.R. in the Christian Literacy Series. My greatest joy was when he gained about two reading levels in four months, which enabled him to use a simple version of the New Testament (written on a third to fourth grade reading level). Two weeks prior to being transferred from prison he gave his life to the Lord. Since he could now read the Bible, J.R. was able to turn more and more to Jesus as times got tougher. I saw him grow during this time.

Learning to read is necessary in bringing a person from a position of needing "milk" to being able to handle the "meat" of the Gospel and that's Good News.

Donna Pisatelli grew up in Long Island, New York and has a degree in Elementary Education and a Masters Degree in Community Counseling. Since 1986 she has been involved in Literacy work and has just completed a term with We Care Prison Ministry in Wetumpka, Alabama.

## "To Repeat What One Has Learned"

*Following is an old Chinese/Vietnamese saying sent in a Christmas card to Lori Weiler, from a Vietnamese surgeon who currently works at the Mennonite Centre. It is the story of so many immigrant professionals whose credentials are unrecognized in North America.*

"To learn and in due time to repeat what one has learnt, is that not after all pleasure?

That friends should come to one from afar, is that not after all delightful?

To remain unsoured even though one's merits are unrecognized by others, is that not after all what is expected of a person?"

by Lori Weiler

## Inside the Waiting Room of MCN...and Beyond

*"I was a stranger and you invited me in... I was in prison [unable to speak] and you came to me. I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Words of Jesus in Matt. 25:35, 36, 40.*

I work for the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers in Edmonton, Alta. The center serves new Canadians in a number of ways, one of which is ESL (English as a Second Language). We welcome people from every language group. My assignment is to coordinate one facet of our program, Drop-in-Conversation classes.

Classes are taught by volunteer tutors. These tutors range from experienced public school teachers, to high school students, to former ESL students, to concerned individuals who care about the struggle of newcomers and want to help. Our space decrees that classes are no larger than 5 students. However, when the waiting room is crammed full, the tutors are most willing to take more students.

Our waiting room holds three couches with varying degrees of comfort, clothes trees and a clothes rack, a small counter holding a coffee urn, coffee fixings and cups. The walls are filled with notices of other ESL classes, AIDS and family violence posters, a calendar, and other signs in various languages. There is a bookshelf stuffed with issues of *National Geographic* and *Reader's Digest*.

**Suggestions for beginning literacy work:**

**1. Pray that God would open your eyes to the doors of opportunity. Then walk in.**

**2. Check the Yellow Pages of the telephone book under "Literacy."**

**3. Check out the Social Welfare office.**

This waiting room is a gathering place. It is where some of the most exciting things happen. Here people meet friends who understand the struggle of adapting to a strange place with strange customs. It is a place where people gather to relax while sipping coffee before beginning the enormous task of practicing this strange language called English.

I first met Maria (not her real name) in this waiting room. She is a tiny grandmother with long, long, grey hair, bright eyes, and a ready smile on her deeply-lined face. She greets me with a hug and hugs mean a lot to me. Often a smile and a hug is as far as our communication goes. My Spanish is rusty and English comes hard for Maria.

Maria is from El Salvador. One day Maria told me about her experiences there. With many tears and lots of Spanish she told me about finding two of her children murdered. I didn't understand many of the details but I did see her pain and her grief. I hope that talking about her sorrow helped to heal Maria.

Some months ago Yolanda (also not her real name) entered our waiting room. She looked defeated. She wouldn't make eye contact with me. Her head was down and she spoke in a whisper. Yolanda enrolled in classes.

Yolanda is from Poland. Recently I gave her a new Drop-in card. They are pink this year. When she got it she laughed and said that she was now a member of the Communist Party. She is joking a lot more now. Her whole attitude is changing. She is happier.

These are some of the changes I've seen in students as they learn English and become more comfortable in their new country. Following are some reflections from Becky Eckert, a volunteer tutor here at the center two days a week.

**Lori Weiler is an MCC service worker at the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers in Edmonton, Alberta. She earlier worked in adult literacy for four years in southeastern Kentucky.**



by Becky Eckert

## A Tutor's Perspective

Here I am....your tutor. I look at you. I tell you my name, where I'm from...and that's it. Perhaps you can see my nervousness, but you don't remark on it because I haven't told you about it. Besides, you don't know the word "nervous" in English--and I don't know it in Mandarin, or Cambodian, or Spanish or Polish.

I know my own need for language--my need to express myself--and I wonder how you cope with your need. Perhaps you can only speak with family and friends, for at work, while traveling, while learning, the language is English and you are stuck with the limitations of portraying meaning with body language. And it is hard. I try to convey to you, when I can, some understanding of the poetry of language--the need for laughter, tears, purpose, joy. So often, I fail. The language barrier on your part is unavoidable, but I too have a barrier--my inability to express myself in ways other than University-level English.

4. Research any local obstacles to literacy...such as locking people into a socioeconomic level or class.

5. When you find your "student," find out what she/he wants to learn. Build on any knowledge already there. In "Driving Miss Daisy" remember Miss Daisy in the cemetery telling Hoke, her driver, to plant flowers on her husband's grave. "But I can't read," he is ashamed to admit.

Miss Daisy kindly says, "But you know the ABCs. Look for a name starting with B and ending with R...BAUER." He could handle that and he found the grave.

6. Check out pre-natal clinics in low income areas for mothers-to-be who would enjoy learning to read. Survival rates of young children are directly related to literacy in mothers.

7. Check out retirement centers near learning centers for retirees who could become English conversation friends to internationals.

8. As church planting teams settle in needy urban areas, literacy needs high on the list of priorities can be a useful key.

You do appreciate my attempts, though. I know you do. I see the strange wonder in your eyes as I talk about homesickness, trying to live on a meager budget, dealing with feelings for family and friends who are half-way across the world or who have died. Once, I tried to explain the difference between "house" and "home" to some of you. A few of you understood, most of you didn't. But you heard the words "love," "family," "belonging"--and I think, knew that you were not strangers in a strange land, that in truth we **all** are, and that feeling out-of-place and longing for a place to belong are feelings that are very real in this strange, fast-paced and materialistic new environment.

But while you appreciate my attempts to help, your need goes unsatisfied; you still are unable to express yourself. You become excited and stumble over your words in your haste to speak. While you don't blame anyone, you are disappointed when I can't understand the word that you are saying in English, that to me is distorted by pronunciation. You are so happy to see me on the street outside of class, but after the "hello" and "good morning, teacher!", there isn't much to say and your mouth curves in a sad and gentle smile. You get angry and frustrated when you seek to explain something about which you are very knowledgeable, when you are limited to kindergarten English. Yet, despite these frustrations, still you press on.

I think for many of you, my students, my friends, ESL is not so much a time to learn a new skill as it is a time to learn more of what it means to be you. While jobs may be uppermost in your minds, we aren't just learning the qualifications for employment. We're working on ways to become vulnerable.

Becoming vulnerable is hard work. I look at you Kim, as you struggle on despite murders, brokenness and separation in your family. And at you José, as you seek to somehow put your concern for the politics of the world into action. And at you Anh, a 20-year old woman who has only a few friends in the city and a desire to learn. I can see the effort and courage that it takes to be open about yourself and share these things. To truly "welcome the stranger" takes vulnerability--for the possibilities of rejection, of being taken advantage of, of being ridiculed, are all real. It is your courage that gives me courage to be vulnerable. I have seen that it is only in welcoming the stranger that I can truly grow to become myself.

**Becky Eckert serves in the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers in Edmonton, Alta. Becky, a volunteer with the Jeremiah Project (a low-budgeted, interdenominational program for Christian youth to live in community and work in inner city), also works with The Elizabeth Fry Society, helping women in conflict with the law. She's two years into her B.A. degree at University of Alberta.**



by Lori Weiler

## And All I Can Do Is Smile.

From all over the world they come;  
some desperate  
some demanding  
most gracious  
The only language we share is a smile.

It must be frustrating to have  
a lifetime of experiences  
and not be able to tell them.

Basic needs can be made known--  
but what about the basic need  
to be known?

I wish I could know all  
that I see in their eyes:  
their stories, their sadnesses,  
their wisdom.

All I can do is smile.



### Women in Ministry

- **Kathy Koop** has begun work as chaplain at United Mennonite Home for the Aged in Vineland, Ont.
- **Jo-Ann Martens** has begun a two-year term as assistant professor in New Testament at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg.

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## Resources

Ely, J. Wesley. *Handbook for Teaching Bible-Based ESL*. 1990, Publications International, 6401 The Paseo, Kansas City, MO 64131.

Available from Multi-Language Media, Box 301, Ephrata, PA 17522, (717) 738-0532

*Pathways to Adult Learning*. The Mayor's Commission on Literacy in Philadelphia, 1990.

*Laubach Literacy International*. Box 131, Syracuse, NY 13210.

A one-day training course...good for people with no former teacher training.

*Literacy Volunteers of America*. 404 Oak St., Syracuse, NY 13203.

LVA is 16 hours of training over a six week period.

*Christian Literacy Series*. Contact Dr. Bill Kofmehl, 540 Perry Highway, Pittsburgh, PA 15229, (412) 364-3777  
A four-hour workshop.

*Literacy and Evangelism International*. 1800 South Jackson Ave., Tulsa, OK 74107, (918) 585-3826.

A 10-week training session each fall.

## Letters

- Thank you for the *Report*. I appreciate the way it deals with issues honestly and sincerely. I'm wondering if something could be written for those women who in spite of their love and care, and because of a multitude of difficulties, find little enjoyment in the years at home with their children. It seems among Christians there is the expectation that every mother will enjoy that stage. That puts pressure on those who are so emotionally and physically exhausted that it is all they can manage to get through each day. I wondered if the recent issue of "Motherhood, Careers and Spirituality" might include some of those experiences. It didn't, but I did appreciate the other thoughts, feelings, journeys expressed in that issue.

--Saralyn Horsburgh, Victoria, Australia

- I read with interest Louella Cronkhite's article "It's Just Nerves" in the March/April issue on "Women and Drugs." I agree with most of her assertions--that tranquilizers are over prescribed for women, that women are sometimes treated for psychiatric disorders when the real problems are societal, that men and women are approached differently by physicians, etc.

I was concerned about one assertion, "...although drugs can change the way people feel, they do nothing for the underlying causes of the problem." This is probably true if the assertion is limited to the use of tranquilizers for stress-related problems. But some psychotropic medications are prescribed for disorders that have a genetic or biologic basis; in these illnesses (such as schizophrenia or manic-depressive illness) the drugs do affect the underlying cause of the problem. Yes, "women need self-confidence, skills, educational and employment opportunities..." and some women (and men) also need medication (often long-term) to control their psychiatric illnesses so that they can use their skills and take advantage of educational and employment opportunities.

Thanks for your thought-provoking and stimulating publication.

--Martha Yoder Maust, Indianapolis, Ind.

- **Betty Pries** is summer pastoral intern at United Mennonite Church in Toronto, Ont. She is a student at Canadian Mennonite Bible College.
- **Lynell Bergen**, student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, is a summer pastoral intern at Tabor Mennonite Church in Newton, Kan.
- **Renee Sauder** of North Newton, Kan., is coordinator of Women in Leadership Ministries, a new staff position of the Mennonite Church Board of Congregational Ministries. In her new position, Sauder will serve as pastor to women pastors across the Mennonite church and be staff liaison to the Women in Leadership Ministry Committee established by the Mennonite Church.
- **Irma Fast Dueck** of Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, will begin this fall as half-time instructor in practical theology at Canadian Mennonite Bible College.
- **Christine Juhnke** and **Michael Yeakey**, co-pastors at Salina (Kan.) Mennonite Church, were ordained April 28.
- **Bev Suderman** was licensed for service Feb. 17 at Toronto (Ont.) United Mennonite Church.
- **Beth Ranck Yoder**, former English teacher at Christopher Dock Mennonite School, is new co-pastor at Perkaspie (Pa.) Mennonite Church, along with Wilson Kratz.

## Applicants Needed for U.S. Committee on Women's Concerns

The MCC U.S. Committee on Women's Concerns (CWC) is seeking candidates for two committee positions, to replace members whose terms are expiring this fall.

The positions are for Brethren in Christ and General Conference representation. We are especially seeking applications from women living in East Coast, Central States and West Coast regions of the United States.

Members of CWC meet twice yearly to help set agenda for the committee and for the CWC U.S. staff person. For a job description and more information, contact Tina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns Desk, MCC U.S., Box 500, Akron, PA 17501. Applications are due September 15.

## News and Verbs

- A Consultation for **Men Working to End Violence Against Women** will be Feb. 10-13 at Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp in Divide, Col. It is sponsored by the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church. Enrollment is for men only. Contact Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries, Box 1245, Elkhart, IN 46516; (219) 294-7523.
- Norma Johnson, executive secretary of General Conference Commission on Education, and Marlene Kropf, minister of worship and spirituality for the Mennonite Church Board of Congregational Ministries, are co-chairs of a new **MC/GC Spirituality Reference Council**. The council's task is to encourage spiritual renewal in the church. One project is compilation of a list of spirituality resources for congregations.
- Focusing on **male spirituality** has been part of the task of Heinz Janzen, coordinator of Mennonite Men, a program of the General Conference Mennonite Church. Janzen began as coordinator in October. He notes that feminist theology is a distinct movement, but feels male spirituality has been neglected. He encourages men to read about male spirituality and participate in work projects and prayer groups.
- A new international cookbook, *Extending the Table: A World Community Cookbook*, has just been released by Herald Press, Scottdale, Pa., 15683. The cookbook is an educational project of MCC, authored by Joetta Handrich Schlabach, long-time MCC international service worker and educator. Kristina Mast Burnett, *Report* editor, was recipe editor for the project. The book features recipes and stories from over 80 countries.
- Nan Cressman is staff person for a new 3-year pilot project, a **conciliation service** available to Mennonites and Brethren in Christ churches in **eastern Canada**. The project is sponsored by four Mennonite and Brethren in Christ conferences in Eastern Canada and MCC Ontario. Cressman will develop a network of conciliators who can be called on to assist in conflicts.
- Nan Cressman of MCC Ontario was director of a **television documentary "The Different Path: Conscientious Objectors in World War II."** The documentary, her first directing role, was named best 1990 documentary by the Ontario Cable Television Association. It has now been submitted to the Canadian cable awards. The show is available through MCC.
- An east-coast **conference on family abuse** issues will be January 23-25, 1992, in Mount Joy, Pa. Called "Facing Family Abuse: From Darkness to Light," the event is for survivors, caregivers, pastors and professionals. It is being planned by MCC Women's Desk and MCC East Coast, Lancaster Mennonite Conference Family Life Commission, Philhaven Hospital, Brethren in Christ Board of Brotherhood Concerns, and the host congregations, Cross Roads Brethren in Christ and Mount Joy Mennonite Churches. For information contact Cross Roads Brethren in Christ Church, 800 Donegal Springs Rd., Mount Joy, PA 17552; (717) 653-1616.
- MCC Women's Concerns desks facilitates a **network for adult survivors** of abuse. The address of this network has moved from Winkler, Man., to Akron, Pa. Those wanting more information on the network should write to: Tina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns Desk, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.





Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.

- "Women are the fastest growing part of the AIDS epidemic in the U.S.; AIDS is now **one of the five leading causes of death for women** between the ages of 15 and 44," reports Peg Byron in the Jan./Feb. issue of *Ms.* magazine. Byron reports that "no major research has addressed the question of whether women may experience any symptoms different from men's." It is known that women with AIDS are frequently diagnosed much later than men. The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the National Cancer Institute are the two institutes that receive the bulk of U.S. AIDS research dollars; neither have sponsored studies on AIDS and women.
  - Mary Raber of Winnipeg will begin this fall as **director of Soviet Union ministries** for MCC. She will also teach a church history course at a Bible institute in the Ukraine.
  - Miriam Martin is the new **administrator for Atlantic Coast Conference** (Mennonite Church), whose offices are now in Morgantown, Pa. Martin, also editor of the conference periodical, succeeds Melville Nafziger.
  - The United States is the "**most violent and self-destructive nation** on earth," the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee said in a March 12 report, according to *The Wichita (Kan.) Eagle*. The report depicted Americans killing, raping and robbing one another at a furious rate, surpassing every other country that keeps crime records. The nation's people committed a record number of killings in 1990—at least 23,300 or nearly 3 an hour--and a record number of rapes, robberies and assaults, the committee said. "When viewed from the national perspective, these crime rates are sobering. When viewed from the international perspective, they are truly embarrassing." The report noted that the murder rate in the U.S. is more than twice that of Northern Ireland, four times that of Italy, nine times England's and 11 times Japan's. Over the past generation the number of violent crimes has risen 12 times faster than the population.
- Excerpted from *The Mennonite*, April 9, 1991

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Kristina Mast Burnett. Layout by Karen Falk. Correspondence and address changes should be sent to Kristina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns, MCC, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

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